

THE TONGUE AND THE HEART

James 3:1-12

On its own, the tongue is a soft, small, and harmless member of the human body. When James writes about the tongue, he regards it as an organ of a human being's spiritual disposition.

The tongue is difficult to control. James uses illustrations of other little things that have great results. *"If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we turn their whole bodies. Look also at the ships. Although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, a very small rudder turns them wherever the inclination of the pilot leads him. So also, the tongue is a small member of the body, and yet it makes great boasts. See what a small fire sets such a large forest ablaze."* The first two examples are neutral. Little bits and little rudders are mostly used to produce big results that are beneficial. In his third example, fire, James's focus is on the destruction it can cause.

The tongue causes great damage. James uses the examples of a bushfire, and the whole world spoilt by sin: *"The tongue is also a fire. It is a world of wickedness in our members. It defiles the whole body. It sets the whole course of life aflame."* We do not need to have the point explained. We tell children not to play with matches, because they have tremendous capacity to cause damage.

The tongue cannot be tamed. James contrasts human beings' ability to tame animals. *"Every creature, from animals to birds to reptiles and to sea-creatures is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."*

The tongue illustrates a horrendous contradiction. When God created, He blessed His creation. Because of sin, His curse came on the ground. Human tongues, including those of believers, disclose awful discrepancy. *"With the tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My fellow Christians, these things ought not to be so."* Here James unfolds two statements earlier in his letter: *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry,"* and *"If anyone thinks that he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, his religion is worthless."* People can pretend in many areas of life, but their tongues quickly expose them as hypocrites.

Though James says that bad language comes out of the mouth, the mouth is not the source of it. Rotten language has a double source. The devil is one source of the tongue's evil. Jesus taught the same thing when He said that we should not use any expressions that begin with "By" to add force to statements. *"Let your language be, 'Yes, yes'; 'No, no.' Anything more than these comes from the Evil One."* James expresses the same thing in the awful statement, that the tongue *"is set aflame by hell."* Jesus expressed the same thing as His brother James when He said, *"Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be subject to hellfire."*

The other source of the damage done by the tongue is the human heart, meaning the human being's personality, or spiritual disposition. Jesus expressed the same thing when He said the class of things that come from inside a human being is the class of things that defiles him. When Jesus states, in Matthew 12, *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"* the literal translation of the abstract *"abundance"* easily masks its dreadful force for one who speaks Modern English. Jesus means, *"The mouth speaks what runs over from the heart."* You can tell what a person's heart is like by what you hear coming from inside him. The words that a person uses are a concentration of his personality and of the evil inside him.

James refers to the source by a comparison with a spring of water: *"Surely a spring does not pour out both fresh and bitter water from the same opening? ...Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water."* He takes up the point that His elder and greater brother used, that one can argue from the tree to the fruit and also the other way around: *"My fellow Christians, surely a fig tree cannot produce olives, or a grapevine figs?"* It is unnatural for one tongue to produce such contrary results. Nothing like that can be found in nature.

This is serious for Christians, because God's judgment falls on misuse of the tongue. At the beginning of this passage, James makes a double point. Because a teacher has greater influence, he will be more accountable. A teacher is particularly vulnerable, because he works by using his tongue. No one should be over-eager to teach. *"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow-Christians, because you know that we shall be judged more severely. For we all commit many sins."* In addition, because the tongue is so difficult to control, a person who controls his tongue perfectly has control of himself in all other areas of his life. *"If anyone does not sin in what he says, he is a perfect man, who can also keep his whole body in check."*

We praise God that He has provided the remedy for this fierce exposure of the human condition. It is the forgiveness that Jesus came into His creation to earn and to offer, after it had fallen under a curse instead of a

blessing. God's gracious forgiveness for Christ's sake, which faith receives, has a double benefit. It erases human sin, and it then also becomes the motive and power that prompts redeemed hearts, and consequently, tongues, to express prayer, praise and thanks to God. Jesus Christ came under the condemnation of the Law for our cursing, though evil words never came from His own mouth. Because of what He has done, at such great cost, He has become the power to constrain us to follow His example in this area of life also. Peter wrote, about Him, *"No deceit was found in His mouth. When others insulted Him, He did not insult them in return; when He suffered, He did not make threats, but handed it over to Him who judges justly."*